

Helpline counsels gays, lesbians

Offering information and support

By Greg Hough
Emerald Contributor

A statewide telephone answering service used in Eugene has averaged 200 calls per month in its first four months of counseling members of the gay and lesbian communities.

"It's totally a hit," said Rya Phillips, director and volunteer coordinator of the Gay and Lesbian Helpline, which was organized by the Lavender Network, a local gay and lesbian support group.

"We really are the only line in town that a homosexual person can call to discuss their sexuality," Phillips said. "We're trying to break down barriers of isolation in the gay community, to give people access to help."

Phillips said the Helpline office has a staff of 25 phone

workers and 10 other volunteers. Either one or two people are answering phones during the line's hours, which are 4 p.m. to 8 a.m. every day.

The line was opened in July after receiving a matching grant of \$6,000 from the Chicago Resource Center, which Phillips said is "sort of a gay and lesbian United Way."

The grant helps pay for an 800 number that the Helpline offers statewide, plus a special service which allows deaf people to communicate with Helpline volunteers through a Telecommunications Device for the Deaf machine. These and other Helpline services will require ongoing fundraising activities, Phillips said.

Phillips said that 110 men called Helpline number (683-2428) in October, twice the number of women who called. Overall, she said, about one-fourth more men have called.

Phone volunteers work any of three shifts during Helpline hours, Phillips said. The majority of calls come between 4 p.m. and 10 p.m., she added.

One of the most common issues that callers discuss with volunteers is the problem of "coming out of the closet" and expressing their sexuality, Phillips said.

"A person's bisexuality comes up as an issue a lot," Phillips said. "People will call to say their married, but they've always been attracted to their own sex, and they want to know what that means."

Phillips said heterosexuals also call the Helpline, using it to inquire about friends or relatives who are gay.

"Many of the gays and lesbians who call are dealing with isolation and depression," Phillips said. "We do referrals, events information, where to go to have fun. If they're disabled, we give them disability access information."

University senior Michael Peeler, who is co-director of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GALA) on campus, works three to six hours a week as a Helpline phone volunteer.

Peeler said that during his

first shift in September, "I thought I'd only work three hours. But the phone wouldn't stop ringing, and I ended up being there seven hours."

Peeler, who is an English major, said he's talked with callers about a wide array of issues, from locating the local gay bars to dealing with parents who won't accept a teenager's homosexuality.

"One guy said he'd broken up with his ex-lover and was just sitting around, real depressed," Peeler said. "I spoke with him about an hour-and-a-half, to the point where the conversation started to lighten up a bit."

Peeler said he's spoken to several callers who were considering suicide.

"I've heard they told their mothers they're gay and their mothers aren't talking to them," Peeler said. "Or that their roommate wants to kill them. Or that because they're in the closet they have to sneak around and have sleazy sex."

"If I don't feel good about where the caller is headed, I'll stay on the line as long as I can," Peeler said. "We actively participate in listening to the caller, making sure we know they know exactly where their situation is and what they can do. I figure that most people who take the time to call us will be willing to go to great lengths to work something out."

Phillips said most of the calls have come from the Eugene and Portland areas, and that she is contacting newspapers and stations in small towns around the state, seeking their cooperation in promoting the service.

"We have a small publicity budget, but we are able to put classifieds in many of the straight papers," Phillips said.

A harder task, Phillips said, is getting radio and television stations in the Eugene area to run a public service announcement for the Helpline.

"I've written to all the stations," Phillips said. "But as far as I can tell, not one has run the PSA. We've had to rely on flyers, stickers, referrals, anything we can get the word out."

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